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ABSTRACT

Learning a foreign language in an immersion setting is possible at all levels in programs designed to provide immersion experiences lasting a few days or even a few hours. The planning and administration of a brief immersion program require leadership and attention to the formulation of a written plan. The program must be carefully scheduled, with special thought given to the introductory phase. Finding personnel may be one of the more difficult obstacles. After the completion of the program, an evaluation is of prime importance. (JB)

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What You Always Wanted to Ask About Immersion And Were Afraid to Know!

Patricia Klinck

The teaching of second languages has long suffered from the confining aspects of the classroom. Far from the target culture, governed by arbitrary class bells, endeavors to produce "natural" conversation and spontaneous communication have not been entirely successful. Aware of these limitations, second language educators have sought to expand the student's linguistic experience. The growth in exchange programs, summer bursary programs and bilingual schools are results of the search for "real" situations.

Research bears out the need for immersion in the target language. Indeed, without it, the student does not obtain language competency.

However, for many students, summer bursaries, exchanges and bilingual schools are out of reach. As second language teachers face classes in which so few - if any - students have been able to profit from immersion, they realize that, even with the best of intentions, their classroom situation can only give a facsimile of the target language.

The purpose of this article is to address the classroom teacher who finds himself confronted with this dilemma: how to give students the immersion experience without actually going to the target culture. It will deal with the choice of a simulated immersion situation and how to plan, program, staff and evaluate the project. It will discuss several ways in which the teacher can evaluate the program. Funding and approval will not be dealt with per se. They depend on the policies of school districts. However many of the aspects of planning will serve to assist in approval of the project and funding.

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1. Choice of an Immersion Situation

There is a wide choice of immersion situations open to the enterprising educator. They vary in length, goals and personnel.

It is not necessary to undertake a long project to give students an understanding of the immersion experience, i.e. where the target language must be used at all times. It may be "une matinee"[1], a day, a weekend or longer. The length will depend upon the age of the students, personnel and funding.

The goals of immersion are also varied. Generally it purports to encourage the active use of already acquired vocabulary and structures. The basic assumption is that communication is the prime goal. Corrections are done only when the message is not clear.

Depending upon the personnel, the target culture can be taught or experienced.

In longer immersions, the organizers may decide upon a curriculum, generally in function of structures and vocabulary needed to carry out planned activities.

It may be planned for any age level: elementary students, secondary students, continuing education adult classes and any linguistic level from rank beginner to bilingual student.

The choice of immersion will also be strongly influenced by the French speaking population at your disposal. Although it is desirable to have bilingual or native speakers who add an element of culture and a large grain

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[1] As Supervisor of Second Languages with the Calgary Board of Education (1976-78), I organized a series of 'Matinees Francaises' for students of grades 9-12. Schools booked a morning immersion which was staffed by monitors and a teacher hired to conduct and organize activities.

of human interest, this is often not possible. Your choice of personnel must therefore be based on: a basic level of linguistic competency, experience with second language teaching, but also enthusiasm and desire to participate.

II. Administration of an Immersion Situation

In this section the elements of administration will be discussed. Administration refers to the steps essential to planning an immersion experience. This includes a written overview of the project: rationale, goals, choice of participants and contingency plans and public relations. It must be clearly understood that the plans will not remain static. As different participants contribute, details and aspects will change. However, in the writer's experience, a written plan is a sina qua non. It serves as the basis for approval and funding, for meetings with involved parties and as a "point de repere" for teaching personnel.

The following are intended to elaborate on the aspects of planning. Not all suggestions will be relevant to your project.

1. Leadership

As several teachers may be involved in the project it is an advantage to agree upon a leader or chairperson. The committee of teachers will then be in charge of planning and program. Student involvement should be encouraged whenever possible. If other French speakers are to be involved their input is essential. All projects should include some evaluation. Any external evaluators should be involved early in the planning.

2. The Written Plan

The first aspect to address is the rationale for the immersion. Some of the philosophical issues were touched upon at the beginning of this article. The organizers will doubtless want to find a statement from research or a school of thought to back their project.

The plan should also indicate the anticipated outcomes for the students. These may include some linguistic changes, culture knowledge, changes in attitude, etc. The outcomes will vary according to the length of the project and the personnel involved. Where possible it should be stated that linguistic improvement and the acquisition of knowledge are not the most important changes. The challenge of a new learning situation and the interaction with a variety of people are certainly of equal importance.

The location of the immersion and why it was chosen must be included in the report. It is necessary to highlight the isolation aspect of any immersion experience. Students should be removed from their "normal" environment. This may mean another school site or a camp out of town. If the students will be there overnight, some description of the accommodation, the recreation facilities (indoor and outdoor) should be included. This allows for planning of clothing, etc.

The written plan should also include a description of the instructional personnel, the student participants and any outside evaluators. The criteria for choice at all levels must be stated, as must the ratio of students to French speakers.

If necessary, a budget giving a broad outline of the costs should be included. This would show the sources and the amount of funding. General expenses such as transportation, accommodation and honoraria should be included.

Everyone should be aware of the contingency plans in case of poor weather or illness.

Lastly a time line indicating the dates of approval, funding, meetings with concerned parties (if necessary), deadlines for release letters or fees should be included.

3. Other Considerations.

It is of vital importance that public relations be well handled. There is a tremendous sense of accomplishment and a general "joie de vivre" which result from immersion experiences. The public, whether other school students, administration or parents, should be made aware of this. The information is best given by the participants who choose how they want to report. Reporting may be done in writing, oral presentations with any combination of visual aids.

III. Program

This is likely the most crucial aspect of any immersion project. The most successful immersions in the writer's experience have been carefully planned to answer the needs and interests of the students and to incorporate the principles of good second language learning. They have also provided a balance of time between recreation, linguistic and "free" activities. The pacing must include consideration for different group dynamics: one on one, small groups, whole groups.

The following are some suggestions for setting up a program.

1. The introductory phase

Regardless of the length of the immersion, the introductory phase must be carefully thought out. During this period, one establishes several aspects. Firstly that only the target language will be used. Secondly that the ambiance will be relaxed and supportive.

Students should be welcomed in the target language (at their level) and told that only the target language is to be used. They may be given a resume of what will happen that morning.

The atmosphere is best established by various "ice breaker" games - and where possible physical activities. Games such as "Qui sui-je" which allow

students to circulate and talk to one another are excellent. Presentations to the group should come later. In any case corrections should be minimal and only in extreme cases where meaning is obscured.

Even though the goal of the project may be oral communication, activities should vary from writing and reading to speaking and listening. The change of pace afforded by reading gives the students a needed break and also accommodates students who learn visually.

Where possible, games such as "bottines" , broom ball, etc. allow for tensions to be released. Where lively activities are not possible, pacing should include moving from groups, charades, etc. as well as sitting. On longer immersions, some free time should be worked into the program.

At this point the teacher committee may find it most useful to plot the day's activities. This allows them to see which goals are being furthered by the activities chosen. The writer has found the following chart to be useful.

Activity and Time	Monitor's Role	Form of Student Involvement	Size of Group
1. Charades (20 minutes)	Pre-planning, assisting his group, use of French	Acting of the charage, guessing in French (oral production)	small groups
2. Crosswords (20 minutes)	Preparation & selection of crosswords, dialogue with individual students	Reading, writing, asking for help (student initiated questions)	alone
3. Presentation of Christmas in Quebec (30 minutes)	Presentation involving visuals & blackboard	Listening Note taking	whole group

This blueprint gives an overview of the skills needed, the pacing, group dynamics and deployment of staff.

Equally useful is to plot a student's day and a teacher's day. By so doing the above mentioned aspects are reviewed - as well as the pacing of intensive activities, recreational time and free time.

Such a timetable might look like the following.

Time	Activity	Involvement
8:00 - 8:30	Breakfast	Informal talk
9:00 - 9:30	Instruction Period (new vocabulary for discussions on families)	a) use of visuals to present vocabulary b) open ended questioning c) encouraging oral production d) listening game
9:30 - 10:00	free period for 2 monitors	none

In a longer project (two days or more) the organizers may wish to do a rough calculation of the percentage of time spent on recreation, leisure and linguistic activities.

IV. Personnel

Finding personnel is one of the major problems for organizers in Western Canada. Budget permitting, University monitors or other native speakers can be invited to assist. This presents problems as not all personnel are actively involved in planning.

In other situations a wide range of francophiles may be found and the problem is one of criterion.

It appears essential that the organizers decide on a basic level of fluency (appropriate to the competency of their students) and on certain other characteristics - e.g. desire and ability to work with the age group, willingness to participate in pre-planning, etc.

As many may have had no training in second language methods, some in-service may be wise. All instructional personnel should be thoroughly

familiar with all aspects of the program.

It is also imperative that tasks be clearly outlined. While this is of greater importance during longer immersions, it should not be overlooked. Both professionally and legally the teachers are ultimately responsible for the curriculum, discipline and safety of the students. All instructional personnel are responsible for setting a model of correct pronunciation and language usage. Native speakers also serve as models of the target culture.

Although not generally included in "personnel" students must also be assigned certain tasks. For longer immersions during which they will miss regular classes, it is their responsibility to look after extra assignments. The second language teacher may wish to assign a diary or journal to be kept in the target language. They are also bound to use as much and as fully as possible the target language.

V. Evaluation

The evaluation is of prime importance. It ensures the integrity of the program - i.e. the congruency between goals, objectives and program. It also shows that the teachers have been most professional in their planning. They have built in their own accountability.

Evaluation will vary from informal to formal external evaluation. The informal evaluation done among the instructional staff and by the students should answer several predetermined questions. It should be done in written form as well as oral.

Immersion projects are unique in the respect that students opt to go. They have some personal goals and expectations. It is highly desirable in

the writer's opinion to foster this self monitoring aspect by asking students to identify their goals and to rate their perceived progress.

External evaluation may take many forms. It is imperative to delineate clearly the mandate of the external evaluation team and the methods to be used.

Conclusion

The amount of time and effort required to organize and realize an immersion project cannot be underestimated. It takes courage, determination, flexibility and conviction. As great as its demands, however, are the rewards. There is a euphoria, a feeling of a shared experience and a tremendous exhilaration for organizers and students alike - regardless of the type of immersion. Both teachers and students will find it an unforgettable experience. Bonne chance et bon courage!